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The Spring of Palestinian Independence Assessing the Bid for UN Recognition

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The main goal of the Palestinian Authority leadership in its bid for recognition as a state and UN membership has been to break the political deadlock and ensure that the future negotiations on a permanent settlement will be based on the June 4, 1967 borders. At the same time, the leadership seeks to avoid an irreversible confrontation with Israel and the international community, and ensure continued calm in the security and economy realms, both vital for the success of their state-building project.

As a result of the UN initiative, PA President Mahmoud Abbas now enjoys wide popular support, having demonstrated to the Palestinian public that he is working with determination to achieve independence and political freedom. In the eyes of his perpetually frustrated and cynical public, it was an encouraging moment, as Abbas proved that he could resist the pressures exerted by the American administration, Israel, and the international community, which had demanded that the PA desist from appealing to the UN. Backed by his associates

in the PA leadership, Abbas was not deterred by threats of punitive measures in the economic sphere, notwithstanding the severe budgetary crisis affecting the PA in recent months due to a decline in foreign aid which has slowed economic growth and affected state-building efforts. Neither did threats from Israel, such as the cancellation of the Oslo Agreement and the annexation of settlement blocs, deter the Palestinian leadership, which estimated, probably correctly that the US and Israel have a clear interest in the existence of the PA and will thus avoid steps that would endanger its survival.

The PA's submission of its application to the Security Council was presented as the beginning of the struggle for “the Spring of Palestinian Independence,” whose defining characteristics are non-violent popular struggle in the spirit of the “Arab Spring,” and political efforts leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state. The leadership is resolute in its position that the political struggle will be conducted within the framework of negotiations with Israel on the basis of the 1967 borders and the freezing of settlement construction, or alternatively within the framework of UN institutions, so that the international community will take responsibility for the Palestinian question, impose its full weight on Israel and force it to break the political impasse.

The Palestinian request for recognition and UN membership is expected to be discussed in the coming weeks by a special committee established by the Security Council. The Palestinian leadership is working to gain a majority in the Council in support of the request, even though it knows that the US will use its veto if the matter is brought to a vote. If the process doesn't drag on too long, the Palestinian leadership will then turn to the General Assembly during the current session to request recognition as a state within the 1967 borders. Such a decision would upgrade the status of the Palestinian delegation to the UN to that of a non-member observer state, which would allow the Palestinians, in their view, to demand that Israel undertake negotiations with the new state of Palestine on the basis of the 1967 borders. However, it is likely that Security Council members will allow members of the Quartet (the US, Russia, the EU and the UN) to attempt to

renew negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, before deciding on the Palestinian request.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian leadership has announced that it has found “encouraging articles” in the Quartet’s latest statement that calls for both sides to resume negotiations within a month, which was issued following the initial Palestinian appeal to the Security Council. The statement did not refer to specific conditions for resuming negotiations; however, the Quartet statement mentioned President Obama’s May 19th speech which referred to the 1967 borders and Israel’s being a Jewish state, and also mentioned the 2003 “Road Map,” which requires, among other things, the cessation of settlement construction. The Palestinian leadership’s stance is that it will not return to negotiations unless Israel accepts all of the Quartet’s references to the 1967 lines and the cessation of settlement construction.

What's Next?

Given the certainty of the American veto of the Palestinian request, the Palestinians will be satisfied with raising the status of PLO representation from that of permanent observer at the UN to non-member observer state. In this event, representatives of Palestine will participate in the deliberations of the General Assembly, without voting rights. The leadership can present this as a meaningful step toward gaining full UN membership as a state. Moreover, it hopes that this upgraded status will enable it to join international covenants and international organizations that allow only UN member states to participate, such as the International Criminal Court and organizations dealing with civil aviation, maritime transportation, and telecommunications. The upgrading at the UN will be presented as international legal recognition that the West Bank is the territory of a state under occupation, and not a territory under dispute between the two parties.

Parallel to its diplomatic efforts, the PA leadership intends to maintain the ongoing cooperation between the IDF and the Palestinian security apparatus, and

in the civilian sector. In this spirit, it will avoid unilaterally establishing new facts on the ground, while making known its desire to renew negotiations for a permanent settlement based on the 1967 borders. It will favor the holding of peaceful protest marches across the West Bank, albeit limited in scope, as part of a non-violent popular struggle, and in order to mobilize support for its actions. The marches will be organized and will take place on predetermined dates and routes in city centers and away from areas bordering on Israeli checkpoints. Palestinian security forces hope they will be able to prevent the marchers from creating confrontations with the IDF and Jewish settlers. They expect that, if necessary, the IDF will use non-lethal means to disperse protesting demonstrators

It is likely that in the absence of a mutually acceptable formula for renewing the political process—because of Israel's opposition to making the 1967 lines the basis for talks and to the freezing of settlement construction, and because of the Palestinians' opposition to the Israeli demand for recognition of Israel as a Jewish state—the political stalemate and the occupation will continue. This situation will emphasize the yawning gap between symbolic value of the Palestinians' UN initiative and the reality of the Palestinian Authority's control over only a small part of the territory designated for statehood. In this context, the Palestinian leadership will gradually be exposed to pressures from the Palestinian public, particularly from the youth, who will demand action to translate the UN achievement into concrete results throughout the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Under these pressures, Mahmoud Abbas is likely to be forced to take steps to implement Palestinian sovereignty over the area. In that event, Israel is likely to put up strong resistance, including taking punitive measures, such as the freezing of funds from taxes it collects for the Palestinian Authority, and/or the reestablishment of checkpoints to restrict Palestinian movement. These measures in turn could well lead to the filing of complaints against Israel at the UN, and as result, gradually raise tensions between Israel and the PA and affect

their cooperation in the security and civil sectors. Mahmoud Abbas, who would now be in danger of losing his legitimacy to a frustrated public, would have to admit his inability to implement Palestinian sovereignty in the area. In such a case, Abbas might well issue an ultimatum to Israel and the Quartet, and announce that if within a given time period there is no progress to allow for a renewal of the political process, he would resign.

His resignation could spark popular unrest and lead to a series of actions and reactions by the Israelis and Palestinians, which would break the existing calm and gradually lead, within a period of several months, to the breakdown of authority and a power vacuum. In that case, Israel would have to accept full responsibility for all of the West Bank, in terms of security, the civil sector, and the economy. These developments could bring about a renewal of more sustained violent confrontation, with deleterious implications for Israel, regionally - particularly regarding relations with Turkey, Egypt and Jordan - and internationally.

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